FROM DUSK TO DAWN

JEFFERSON REY S. TAYAG

Chapter 1
Before The Dawn

“My name is Liwayway T. Ignacio. My hobbies are eating, sleeping, and playing mobile games. Thank you,” he said timidly, then sat down, shifting in his chair with unease.

His classmates exchanged glances.
“Liwayway is such an unusual name.”
“Those hobbies sound so lame.”
More side comments ran quietly through their minds.

Minutes passed, and everyone finished introducing themselves. now it was the teacher’s turn.

“I’m Aurora F. Ramos, but you can call me Ma’am Rora. I’ve been teaching here for seven years, and I’ll be your adviser for the 2025–2026 school year.

This section is called 10–Love, and I expect you to live up to it—especially when it comes to classmates who feel left behind. Funny, isn’t it? The lowest section carrying the highest virtue.”

The class fell silent, surprised at her blunt but unusual introduction. Liwayway was intrigued—this was the first time he had met a teacher who spoke so directly.

“So, as an icebreaker, I prepared an activity for all of you. Please form pairs.”

Liwayway sighed, glancing around. Most of the class had already partnered up.

“Pssst! Hey!” someone whispered.
“Brodie!” a boy called.

Liwayway turned and saw him waving.

“Do you already have a partner? If not, you can team up with me,” the boy offered.

“Ah… uh… sure,” Liwayway replied uncertainly. He slid into the seat beside him.

“Hey, you’re Liwayway, right? Don’t worry, I won’t bite,” Joy grinned. “I’m Joy Reta. Yeah, I know, sounds girly. But your name’s cool—did you know it means sunrise?”

Liwayway felt an unexpected warmth—someone was actually noticing him.

“Really? I always thought it sounded too old-fashioned. My mother gave me that name because I was born just before sunrise. Your name suits you too; you seem pretty jolly,” Liwayway admitted, relaxing a little.

“Oh, pffft! Don’t judge a book by its cover!” Joy laughed.

Liwayway smiled. For the first time, he felt like he had met someone he could be comfortable with.

“Okay, class. Today, in Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao, I want you to answer this question with your partner: What makes a hero? You have twenty minutes to brainstorm, then present your ideas,” Ma’am Rora instructed.

Joy leaned closer and whispered, grinning, “When you fly high, butterfly, and for the country you die.”

Liwayway stifled a laugh. “Joy, we need to focus,” he said.

The two bent over their papers, sharing ideas.
“Are you sure about that one, Liwayway?” Joy muttered.
“I think it’ll work,” Liwayway replied.

“Alright, class, let’s begin the presentations. I’ll call you by seating arrangement. First up: Antaro and Batis.”

The two walked to the front.

“Good morning, everyone. For us, a hero is someone who gives a part of themselves for the betterment of the country,” Batis said.

“Does it only apply to the country?” Ma’am Rora asked.

“No, ma’am. It can also be for the people you love—your parents, children, friends, even your pets,” Antaro answered.

“Very good! Thank you. You may sit down. Next presenters, please.”

One by one, pairs presented. By the time it was Liwayway and Joy’s turn, the clock had already run out.

“Class, it seems we’ve run out of time,” Ma’am Rora said. “We’ll continue next session. For homework, think of one word that best describes you and explain why. Present it tomorrow.”

Joy let out a soft laugh of relief. “Dude! We’re lucky—we didn’t even have to present!” he whispered.

Liwayway sighed. “Yeah, but I was actually ready. You know that feeling when you’re prepared and it gets canceled?”

“Aw, don’t be a downer. You’ll shine on the next assignment,” Joy said, nudging him lightly.
“Yeah, I guess,” Liwayway muttered.

An intimidating man in his late fifties walked into the classroom without anyone noticing. The room was noisy and chaotic, filled with chatter and laughter. Suddenly, a loud smack echoed across the teacher’s desk.

“ARE YOU DONE YET?!” he roared.
The entire class froze.

“YOU PEOPLE HAVE FUCKED-UP SENSES?!” he roared, slamming the desk.

The class froze. Liwayway glanced at Joy—fear already written all over his face. The old man kept ranting, spitting out hateful words.

“YOU PEOPL—” His voice broke off. His hand clutched his chest as though trying to hold his breath in place. Then, with a heavy thud, he collapsed onto the floor.

For a moment, the class remained paralyzed, unable to process what had just happened. The silence shattered when one student screamed—and then the entire room erupted in panic.

Liwayway’s gaze darted back to Joy, who stood frozen in fear. Without hesitation, Liwayway rushed to the fallen man, struggling to lift him. But the man’s weight was too much.

“JOY!” Liwayway shouted desperately. “HELP ME!”
Tears welled in Joy’s eyes as he forced himself to move. Shaking, he ran forward and grabbed his father.

“PAPA!” Joy cried.

Liwayway’s heart skipped a beat. Joy’s father? He had no time to dwell on it. Together, they hauled the unconscious man out of the classroom.

“HELP! HELP US!” Liwayway yelled, his voice cracking.

Moments later, an ambulance arrived, summoned by the school officials. Joy climbed in with his father, while Liwayway stood back, breathless and shaken.

His very first day of school had already turned into a disaster—one tied to his very first friend. Bad luck, it seemed, was determined to follow him.

Classes were dismissed after the incident. Liwayway walked home alone through the rain, his clothes clinging to his skin. When he pushed open the front door, his mother noticed his expression immediately.

“Why the long face?” asked Karmil, his mother.

Liwayway told her everything. She listened, shocked and worried, yet silently thankful her son was unharmed.

“I’m tired, Mother,” Liwayway murmured. “I have no appetite after what happened. I’ll just go to my room and sleep.”

Karmil’s heart ached. Misfortune always seemed to haunt her son. As a child, he was bullied mercilessly. His father had died of a stroke when he was only seven. She alone had carried the burden of raising him, and she worried that life was already weighing too heavily on him.

Lying in bed, Liwayway’s phone buzzed with a message. It was from Joy. Liwayway opened it.

“Friend, you are what makes a hero.”

Liwayway felt a surge of emotions—honor, concern, worry, and disbelief. Me? A hero? But I’m just a clumsy, useless person. The thought lingered in his mind as he asked Joy, “How are you? What happened?”

“It’s a long story,” Joy replied. “I’ll tell you once we meet again.”
“I’ll visit you at the hospital. Wait for me there,” Liwayway said firmly.

“Are you sure? It’s going to get dark soon.”
“Yes, it’s okay,” he answered without hesitation.

Downstairs, he approached his mother. “Ma, I’ll visit Joy in the hospital. I’ll eat dinner with you later,” he said with a smile.
“What’s gotten into you all of a sudden? Earlier you looked like you lost a horse bet,” she’s confused.

Liwayway couldn’t help but feel proud—someone had just called him a hero.

“Nothing, Mom,” he replied, trying to hide his excitement. “I have to go now. I love you. See you later.”

A hero… me? he thought as he walked. It’s the second time someone called me that. His chest swelled with pride—his weakness whenever someone finally noticed him.

After arriving at the hospital, Liwayway noticed a young woman crying in a corner, speaking on her phone. “Our dad… he’s gone,” she sobbed.

Memories flooded his mind. He remembered his own father, who had died when Liwayway was just seven.

~ 8 YEARS AGO~

“Papa!” Liwayway’s voice was bright and soft.
“What is it, son?” his father replied warmly.

“Thank you for always standing up for me when I get bullied.”

“Of course! A parent must always protect their child. I’m a retired military veteran, you know,” his father said proudly. “If I protect citizens, how much more my own family?”

“Papa, you’re a hero!” Liwayway beamed.
But then curiosity struck. “Papa, have you ever… killed someone because of your duty?”

The atmosphere shifted. His father’s smile slowly faded.
“Son, don’t ask your father too much. He just came home from his first day at his new job,” said Karmil, his mother, trying to ease the moment.

“Yes, son,” his father admitted in a low voice. “I have killed many people.”
“Well… bad guys deserve to die, right?” Liwayway asked innocently.

His father sighed. “Son, you’re too young to understand. Taking a human life is… unpleasant. Life is God’s gift.”

“Then why did you kill them?”

This time, his father frowned deeply, guilt rising in his eyes.

“Liwayway! What did I tell you?” his mother snapped, furious. His father began to palpitate. “Honey, get me my hypertension medicine,” he muttered.

After taking it, he lay down to rest.

“Liwayway, you shouldn’t ask those questions,” Karmil said gently but firmly. “Being a soldier is a traumatic duty. Now, go bring your father some water.”

Feeling guilty, Liwayway’s eyes welled with tears. “I’m sorry, Mother. I won’t do it again.”

Karmil patted his head. “Don’t worry. You’ll understand when you’re older.”

He brought his father a glass of water and sat beside him. “Papa… I’m so sorry,” he whispered.

“I’m fine, son,” his father replied softly. “But let me tell you something—every human life matters. Whether rich or poor, big or small, every person deserves to be treated with equity. I regret taking lives because of duty, but I hope someday… God will forgive me.”

Liwayway stayed quiet.

“Dinner’s ready!” Karmil called out.
“Papa, let’s go eat,” Liwayway said, helping him up.

“Shrimp!” his father exclaimed. “My favorite!”
“Oh no, you don’t,” Karmil scolded. “You know your blood pressure.”

“You guys are torturing me!” his father whined comically.

“Don’t be a baby. I cooked an alternative—Adobong Kangkong.”
“Well, that’s still delicious. As long as it’s my wife’s cooking,” he replied with a grin.

The family ate together, then went to bed. Alone in his room, Liwayway opened the window and gazed at the stars. Do all human lives really matter? he wondered. What about the evil ones? The people in suits? They treat lives like garbage and feel no guilt.

Down on the street, he spotted the familiar sight of a homeless man begging there every day, as if the street were his home. People passed by indifferently, until a car stopped. A woman in a suit stepped out.

It was too dark to clearly see her face, but her voice carried. “Do you want a job?” The homeless man blinked, confused. “What job, ma’am? Who are you?”

“My name is Aurora F. Ramos—Rora, for short. I own a small restaurant, and I’m looking for a janitor.”

“But I have no clothes, no place to stay.”

“My restaurant has a dormitory upstairs. You can live there. I’ll buy you clothes, too—so don’t worry.”

Tears welled in the man’s eyes. “Thank you, ma’am. Out of all the people who ignored me, you’re the first to treat me with kindness.”
“No need to be formal,” Rora said with a smile. “Come inside my car, we’ll start right away.”

“But I’m dirty, I haven’t bathed in days. I might stain your car.”
“That doesn’t matter. Just sit in the back.”

The man hesitated, then climbed in.
From his window, Liwayway frowned in confusion. Why did the homeless man go inside the car?
Sleepiness crept over him, and he shut the window. Soon, he was in bed, drifting into dreams.

Chapter 2

The Burden of Guilt

As Liwayway stepped into the room where Joy's father was confined, he saw Joy sleeping beside the bed. Joy's father was still asleep. Liwayway glanced around quietly, then gently patted Joy's back. Joy slowly stirred, his eyes opening to see Liwayway. The two embraced before sitting down together on the chair.

"How are you?" Liwayway asked with concern.

Joy gave a faint smile. "Remember when I told you not to judge a book by its cover? Well… here I am, the two-faced man." He tried to joke to ease the tension.

"Don't say that," Liwayway replied softly. "But see? Even now, you still find the strength to lift others up despite everything. That's admirable."

Joy's smile faded. Liwayway leaned forward. "May I ask what really happened that led to this? "

Joy frowned, fell silent for a moment, then finally spoke. "I only live with my grandparents."

Liwayway was taken aback. "What? Why? You don't have a family?"

Joy's eyes dimmed. "When I was nine, everything broke apart. My mom had an affair with some rich guy. She took my little brother abroad… left me and Dad behind."

Liwayway's face grew heavy. "So… what happened to him?"

Joy's eyes dimmed. "When my mother left, his mind broke. He started drinking every day. Then came the abuse—emotional, physical. Later, even drugs. He loved our family so much that he destroyed himself."

Liwayway could feel the ache in Joy's words.

"But why did your little brother go with your mother and not you?" Joy scoffed. "Well, dummy… he was too young to choose. And I resent my mother—she cheated on the man who gave her everything."

Liwayway sighed. "Oh… my bad."

"Why would your mother cheat if your father was a good man?" Liwayway asked.

"Because she's a gold-digging bitch," Joy spat without hesitation. Liwayway flinched at the bluntness.

“But she asked me to come with her,” Joy added bitterly. “I said no. Never in my life.”

“She still cared for you and your brother, even if she wronged your father,” Liwayway said carefully.

“She wronged all of us,” Joy shot back. “She broke everything.”

Joy continued to rant and say hurtful words towards his own mother.

Liwayway remembered his past while Joy was ranting. It made him feel so guilty that he decided to confess.

“I… I don’t deserve to judge your mother, Joy. Because I’ve done something terrible too.” He said with guilt in his eyes.

Liwayway hesitated, then took a deep breath. “I have something to tell you, Joy.”

Joy tilted his head. “What is it?”

“I once cheated too.” Joy froze, then burst into laughter. “What? In exams?!”

He kept laughing.

“No,” Liwayway muttered. “In relationships. I’m serious.”

Joy’s laughter died. “Seriously? You’re not joking?”

“I’m not.” Liwayway’s voice was firm.

“Tell me more,” Joy said, though disappointment lingered in his eyes. He always thought of Liwayway as someone too moral for that.

“We met back in eighth grade,” Liwayway began. His face grew serious. “She was one of my classmates. From the first day, I noticed her. Naturally beautiful, approachable, graceful…”

Joy bonked him on the head. “You silly snake! What made you cheat on her?”

“Owww!” Liwayway groaned, rubbing his head. “What was that for?!”

“DUDE! I HATE CHEATERS—EVER! My mom was one, and now you?!” Joy said in a mock-angry voice. “I know, I know. I’m sorry. But hear me out, okay? You promised not to judge me when we first met.”

Joy smirked. “And I told you—I’m two-faced! Be ready for another hit.”

Liwayway rolled his eyes. “Anyway… on our first day, I got to class early. Then she walked in. I wanted to sit beside her, but I didn’t have the guts. So I just

admired her from afar until the teacher came in and started arranging seats by surname."

"That's when it happened. My name was finally called: 'Ignacio, Liwayway T.?'

I stood up and sat where I was assigned.

Then the teacher called: 'Ignis, Zoe L.?'"

Liwayway swallowed. "And just like that, she sat beside me."

"Hey." Zoe greeted.

Liwayway nearly jumped out of his skin. It's her! Holy crap! Act normal!

"Oh… hi… um… I'm Hi!" What the hell was that?! he screamed inwardly.

Zoe burst into laughter so loud the teacher noticed.

"Yes, Ms. Ignis? Care to share?" "Nothing, sir… sorry," she said, still giggling.

Hours passed. Finally, it was finally our break.

"So… you want to eat in the cafeteria with me?" Zoe asked.
"Umm… are you sure?" Liwayway replied nervously.
"Dummy, of course! I can tell you're insecure—you should loosen up a bit!" Zoe said cheerfully.

Liwayway felt noticed for the first time, especially by the girl he was secretly infatuated with. As he stood to leave his seat, one of his classmates deliberately tripped him, sending him stumbling to the floor. Laughter erupted around the room.

"What is wrong with you?!" Zoe snapped furiously at the bully.
"So? What are you going to do about it, huh?" the bully mocked.

Zoe's eyes burned with rage. Beneath her cheerful grace, Liwayway saw a fighter who wouldn't back down. She raised her hand, ready to strike, when suddenly another classmate stepped in, grabbing her wrist.

"This isn't the way," he said calmly.

Zoe yanked her hand free. "And who are you supposed to be?"

“My name’s James Andres. Don’t make this worse,” he replied evenly.
“Worse? Who do you think started this in the first place?!” Zoe snapped, still frustrated.

“Just trust me—go with the flow,” Andres said, steady and unshaken.

Zoe finally calmed down, exhaled sharply, and stormed out of the room.

Andres chuckled. “That girl’s a fighter,” he said lightly.

Liwayway, still shaken, thanked Andres for de-escalating the situation before quickly rushing after Zoe.

He found her in the cafeteria, sitting alone at a table with earphones in.
“Zoe?” he said softly, sitting beside her.

She pulled out her earphones and looked at him. “Oh, Liwayway. I’m sorry about earlier. I just… I can’t stand people who belittle others.”
“You don’t need to apologize,” he said. “Actually, that was the first time someone stood up for me at this school.”

Zoe tilted her head, her expression softening. “Are you bullied often?”
“Since childhood,” Liwayway admitted quietly.

“I’m really sorry to hear that. That’s why I hate bullies—they project their insecurities onto others and spread misery.”

As they spoke, Andres walked into the cafeteria and sat beside Liwayway.

Zoe rolled her eyes.

“Oh great, here comes the pacifist,” she scoffed.

“You don’t have to act hostile—I’m on your side,” Andres replied with a grin. “In fact, I already came up with a plan.”

He pulled out his phone and showed them a video: the bully tripping Liwayway.

Both Zoe and Liwayway froze in shock. Zoe’s eyes lit up.
“You recorded it?” she asked, amazed.

“Yep. And I’m planning to slip this clip into our teacher’s PowerPoint during class. The moment the projector turns on—boom, the truth plays for everyone to see.”

Zoe smirked. “That’s brilliant. I’m in.”

Liwayway’s stomach knotted. “Isn’t that too much? Humiliating him in front of everyone?”

Andres leaned back, calm but sharp. “Sometimes justice only happens when the truth is seen. You deserve that much.”
“I agree,” Zoe added. She leaned closer to Liwayway. “Don’t worry, we’re with you.”

“Thank you… but I’m scared he’ll retaliate if you get involved,” Liwayway admitted.

“We’re not scared,” Zoe and Andres said in unison.

Liwayway inhaled deeply, still anxious, but Andres put a reassuring hand on his shoulder.
“Calm down, Liwayway. We’ve got your back.”

For the first time, Liwayway felt safe. He realized he had found not one, but two people he could finally trust.
As the next class began, Liwayway felt his nerves rise.

“Zoe… are we really doing this?” he asked quietly.

“Just act normal,” Zoe replied. “Andres already switched the bully’s file with the video. Don’t ask me how—he’s just good with computers.”

Liwayway swallowed hard. This feels like it won’t end well.

The teacher entered the room. “Presentations start now. I’ll call you by surname. First—Antaro, Benjamin?”

A boy stood up and walked to the front with confidence. Liwayway’s eyes widened. It’s him. The bully… and he’s first? His chest tightened, but Zoe touched his arm gently.

A warm jolt ran through him. For a moment, he felt calm.

That smug face… I want to smash it, Zoe thought, glaring at Antaro.

Antaro opened his file. But instead of his report, the video filled the screen. The class froze, the teacher leaned forward, and Antaro’s smile faded.

“What is this?!” the teacher barked.

The clip played to the end. Silence followed. Antaro’s face burned red, humiliated.

Liwayway’s thoughts raced. What if he blames me? What if he goes after Zoe or Andres?

The teacher’s eyes narrowed. “Antaro! Guidance Office, NOW!”

Still stunned, Antaro obeyed. The class sat in shock, unable to process what had just happened.

Minutes later, he came back—smirking.

“Who recorded that video?!” he demanded, his voice sharp and angry.

Already? How is he back this fast? Was he even punished? Liwayway’s stomach sank.

Then Andres stood. “I did,” he said firmly.

Antaro sneered. “Of course. The school’s pet. Don’t think being in Student Government will save you.”

Andres crossed his arms. “Pet? That’s funny—coming from a nepo baby. Why don’t you tell them you’re the principal’s adopted son? That’s why you get away with everything. You’ve been a bully since seventh grade, and I’m done staying quiet.”

Gasps filled the room. Antaro's fists clenched. "This isn't over, Andres. You'll regret this."

"Grow up," Andres shot back.

Red with rage, Antaro stormed out, slamming the door.

Liwayway and Zoe looked at Andres with admiration. He had stood up not just for himself, but for them too.

For the first time, Liwayway felt what it meant to be a hero.

Thanks to Andres and Zoe.

Chapter 3
Forgiveness

Liwayway's story was interrupted as Joy looked at his father and was shocked that his eyes were already opened. "PAPA!" he shouted then immediately hugged his father.

Liwayway stood up to call the doctor assigned to Joy's father. After a minute, the doctor and nurses finally arrived. The doctor and nurses began to take Joy's father's vitals.

Then suddenly, Joy's father wept. "I am sorry… I am not worthy… please forgive me…" he said in a broken voice while tears keep flowing down his face.

Joy felt heartbroken. His father, deprived from love, ended up to this situation. Tears ran down on Joy's face,
"Papa, you don't have to worry anymore. I will always be here with you, I forgive you." Joy said while weeping.

Liwayway bowed his head down, feeling the ache in the atmosphere, at the same time, feeling tremendous guilt. This is how betrayal affects a person's state of mind. He remembered Zoe.

Joy wipes his father's tears with his hands yet no one was able to wipe his own. Liwayway stayed silent, succumbing to his own thoughts.

Then Joy's grandparents arrived inside the room. They were the parents of Joy's father. "Troy…" said Joy's grandfather, "I'm sorry we failed you…" his grandmother added.

The only family Troy ever had, is finally reunited after hitting the rock bottom.

Few minutes has passed and the situation finally calmed down. The doctor declared that Troy is safe and his vitals are fine.

“My son…” Troy muttered. “Am I a deadbeat father? Where did I go wrong?” Upon hearing this, Liwayway stormed out of the room in tears for he can’t bear the pain and guilt seeing Joy’s family like that.

“No papa, you never did anything wrong, it’s not your fault. It’s not your fault that our family broke apart. It’s not your fault that you loved too much and you got your heart broken.” Joy said.

“I did everyone wrong. I was supposed to be a strong father, someone a child like you could lean upon to, your protector, your guardian. But it was me who gave up easily. It is humiliating as a father that my son was the one who bore all the pain yet never complained.” Troy murmured.

“Papa, stop. Don’t stress yourself too much, you just woke up. What’s important is that we are together now.” said Joy.

Then all of them embraced each other. “We’re sorry for not being there with you when you needed it the most, Troy.” Said Troy’s mother.

Chapter 4
Redemption

As Liwayway opened the front door of his home, the smile he wore when he left earlier faded into a frown. His mother immediately noticed the change.

“What happened to you?” asked Karmil.

“Nothing, Mama. I was just… sad about Joy’s life story,” he replied, hiding the guilt he carried inside.

“Come to the table with me and let’s eat,” Karmil said gently.

Liwayway didn’t have much of an appetite, but he had promised his mother they would eat together. He slowly sat at the dining chair, head bowed.

“I cooked your favorite—chicken curry,” Karmil said warmly, hoping to wipe away her son’s frown.

After taking a bite, Liwayway’s expression softened. “Delicious as always, Mama.”

“Of course!” Karmil grinned, flexing her biceps in a playful manner. “I am Karmil Ramsey!”

Liwayway chuckled, and the two enjoyed supper together.

After doing the dishes, Liwayway bid his mother goodnight and went upstairs. He collapsed onto his bed, covering his eyes with his arm. Then his phone buzzed with a notification.

It was a message from Joy:
Joy: *Bro, why did you leave without telling me? That’s rude, you know.*

Liwayway :*I’m sorry, bro. I suddenly wasn’t feeling well, so I went home early.*

Joy: *Stop lying. I know what you’re really feeling… guilt, right?*

Liwayway froze, stunned that Joy could see through his aching heart. He hesitated, then typed:

Liwayway: *Yes…*

Joy: *Dummy. Nothing will ever change if you keep wallowing in your mistakes. Even if you did something wrong, it doesn’t erase the fact that you’re my friend. We’re all human.*

We're all human. The words echoed in Liwayway's mind.

Joy: *I'm going to class tomorrow, and I don't care if they all judge me. My father is back and on my side, and that's enough,* Joy continued.

Liwayway: *I'll see you there. I need to sleep now, I'm tired… best regards to all of you, bro…*

Chapter 5
What Are You?

The next day of classes, Liwayway was one of the first to enter the room. He sat in his seat, but when he looked around, Joy wasn't there yet. A few minutes later, Ma'am Rora arrived.

"Ignacio, how are you and Reta? How is his father?" she asked with concern.

"We're fine, Ma'am Rora. I visited the hospital last night, and the doctor said Joy's father's vitals were stable," Liwayway replied politely.

"That's a relief. If you or Reta need any help, you can always reach out to me. By the way, is Reta here already?"

"Not yet, Ma'am, but he said he would come to school today."

Just then, Joy came running into the room, his face dripping with sweat.
"Good morning, Ma'am! Sorry I'm late!" he said, catching his breath.

The class chuckled softly at the sight.

"Oh, Reta, you're finally here," Ma'am Rora said. "I just talked to Liwayway earlier, and he assured me everything was fine. Is that true?"

"Yes, Ma'am, it's true," Joy answered.

Ma'am Rora smiled in relief. "Good. As punishment for being late, you'll be the first to present your homework. You haven't forgotten it, have you?" she teased.

Joy gulped. Damn, I totally forgot…
"No, Ma'am, I haven't forgotten."

"Very good. Fix yourself first, then you may proceed," Ma'am Rora said with a smile.

After resting for a bit, Joy walked to the front, took a deep breath, and stood tall.
"The one word that would describe me is… my first name, Joy. For every setback I've faced, no matter how big my trauma is, I stand tall and smile after I endure."

Liwayway was stunned. He realized Joy's inner strength, even if he often acted like a clown.

"That's all, thank you, Ma'am." Joy returned to his seat beside Liwayway.

"That moved me," Liwayway admitted.

"You're my fan now?" Joy teased.

“In your dreams,” Liwayway scoffed.

“That was a nice presentation!” Ma’am Rora said cheerfully. “Who wants to volunteer? I forgot to mention this is a voluntary assignment. Those who volunteer will get plus points for recitation.”

Many students raised their hands, except for Liwayway.

“What’s the matter, bro? I thought it was your time to shine?” Joy nudged him.

“I don’t know… I think my answer is lame,” Liwayway muttered.

“Okay, Antaro, Benjamin, you’re next,” Ma’am Rora called.

Joy paused. “Antaro? You mean that Antaro who bullied you back in eighth grade? He’s our classmate now?!” he whispered harshly.

“Yes, but something happened… I’ll tell you at break,” Liwayway whispered back.

Antaro walked to the front, took a breath, and began.

“Change.” He said.

“ I was once a tyrannical bully who had no regard for other people’s feelings. I was selfish, ruthless—call me any negative thing, it would fit. Until one day, someone had enough. He waited for me after school, wearing a mask so I wouldn’t know who he was. Luckily, he had no weapon.

As I was about to be attacked, a homeless man saved me and drove the guy away. At first, I brushed it off. But what happened after… that’s what made me realize something. I won’t go into details.”

“I can see where this is going…” Joy whispered.

“Thank you. I’m glad you learned your lesson, Ben,” Ma’am Rora said. “Next! Who wants to volunteer?”

More students came forward, sharing words like Love, Forgiveness, Scarred, Trauma.

“Okay class, last presenter! Who wants to go before time runs out?”

“Dude, just do it… JUST DO IT… sponsored by NIKE™,” Joy teased.

Liwayway slowly raised his hand.

“Okay, Ignacio. Come to the front,” Ma’am Rora said.

He walked up nervously, the stares of his classmates heavy on him, as if they were judging his very being. Taking a deep breath, he spoke.

“A human,” he said firmly.

His classmates stifled laughter.
Of course you’re human, what else? Is he pranking us? They thought.

“I am a human because I feel, I think, I love, I hate, I trust, I betray, I tire, I hope, I laugh, I cry. I feel joy and despair. I suffer hurt, yet I also inflict pain on others. That’s what makes me human.”

The entire class fell silent—even Ma’am Rora.

Chapter 6
All Roads Lead To You

“DUDE, THAT WAS AWESOME! I am a human… awooo… I am a human…” Joy teased, grinning at Liwayway.

“Dude, shut up… that was embarrassing,” Liwayway muttered, scratching the back of his head as they walked toward the cafeteria.

“So, what’s for lunch today?” Joy asked.
“I don’t know yet. I’ll buy mine in the cafeteria. What about yours?” Liwayway replied.
“Fried chicken!” Joy exclaimed. “Chicken Joy!” he added with a laugh.

Liwayway chuckled. “That’s… actually witty.”

As they entered the canteen, Liwayway’s eyes scanned the room—and then froze.

Zoe…? There she was, surrounded by her friends. Of course we’d run into each other… same school, same cafeteria…

He tried to shrink back, hiding from the crowd out of embarrassment, though a small part of him secretly wanted to be noticed. One of Zoe’s friends spotted him and called her over.

“Liwayway?” Zoe said, her voice calm but curious.

Liwayway froze, heart racing, words failing him.

Joy leaned closer, whispering, “Who is she, bro?”

“She’s… my ex,” Liwayway murmured, staring at the floor.

“REALLY?! THIS IS THE WOMAN YOU CHE—”

Liwayway bonked Joy on the head.
“Dummy! No need to shout!”

Zoe smiled, suppressing a laugh. “You’re funny as always, Liwayway. Come sit with us.”

Shock and disbelief hit him. Why is she being kind after everything I’ve done? he wondered. Hesitantly, he joined Zoe and her friends, trying to ignore the flutter in his chest.

Zoe invited Joy too, and he plopped down without hesitation.

“So, you’re Liwayway’s new friend?” Zoe asked.

“YESSIR!” Joy answered enthusiastically.

“Take care of him, he’s high maintenance,” Zoe teased.

“GODDAMN RIGHT HE IS!” Joy laughed, throwing an arm around Liwayway.

Liwayway’s face flushed. Do I even deserve this after everything? he thought.

“So… SPILL THE TEA! SPILL THE TEA!” Joy chanted, bouncing in his seat.

“What tea?” Zoe asked, tilting her head in confusion.

“Oh… you know… what really happened between you and Liwayway,” Joy said, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

“I see… so he already told you about it, huh?” Zoe chuckled.
“Yes—but it got interrupted!” Joy replied, waving his hands dramatically.

Liwayway groaned, hiding his face behind his hands. This was going to be more chaotic than I thought.

Chapter 7
My Blood For You

<u>Back in the eighth grade</u>

“Hey, Liwayway!” Zoe shouted. “Do you want to walk home with me?”

“Sure…” Liwayway replied softly. Does she like me too? No… don’t assume. It’s just a friendly invitation, he thought.

The sun dipped low, and darkness began to creep in.

“So… where do you live?” Zoe asked.

“Golden Green Subdivision,” Liwayway answered.

Zoe’s eyes widened. “REALLY?! We live in the same subdivision!” she said excitedly.

Liwayway’s heart raced. His crush lived in the same village as him. “Really? But I’ve never seen you there.”

“We just moved recently. I grew up in Cebu, so I know how to speak Bisaya.”

Liwayway was amazed.

As night fell, they came across a road where masked juvenile delinquents loitered.

Liwayway grew nervous, while Zoe’s posture turned sharp and guarded.

“Stay behind me, Liwayway,” she whispered, moving carefully.

Suddenly, one of the delinquents rushed at Zoe, fist raised and armed with brass knuckles.

“NO!” Liwayway shouted. He jumped in front of her, taking the brutal hit to his forehead. Blood spurted as he fell to the ground, unconscious.

“LIWAYWAY!” Zoe cried.

The delinquents scattered in fear, fleeing into the night. Zoe screamed for help, her voice breaking. “SOMEONE! HELP US!”

A passing car screeched to a halt, and a man stepped out. “What happened?!” he demanded.

“We were attacked by a gang! Please help us!” Zoe pleaded desperately.

“Help me carry him to the car,” the man instructed.

As they sped toward the nearest hospital, Liwayway stirred awake, blood streaming down his forehead.

“Liwayway, you’re bleeding… hang on…” Zoe said, her voice trembling.

Liwayway weakly touched his forehead, then brushed his bloody hand against Zoe’s cheek, staining it red. His blood smeared across the man’s car as well.

“Here, press this towel on your friend’s wound,” the man ordered.

“Zoe, I’m sorry…” Liwayway murmured.

“What the hell are you sorry for?” Zoe’s eyes welled with tears. “This is all my fault…” she whispered.

At the hospital, Liwayway was rushed into the Emergency Room. Zoe sat on the bench, shaken, while the man who had helped them tried to reassure her.

“Don’t worry, your friend will be fine,” he said gently.

“This is all my fault…” she repeated, voice cracking.

“What really happened?” the man asked.

“We were walking when a group of delinquents attacked us. The blow was meant for me, but my friend took it instead,” Zoe admitted, guilt weighing on her words.

“It’s not your fault. He made a heroic choice,” the man replied firmly. Then he noticed her uniform. “Wait… is that Makabago National High School? My wife teaches there.”

“What’s your name, sir?” Zoe asked.

“Randy C. Ramos. My wife’s Aurora F. Ramos. Heard of her?”

“Not yet, sir. What subject does she handle?”

“Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao. She handles Grade 10 students. Which grade are you in?”

“8th grade, sir.”

“She might be your teacher someday. She’s an honorable woman,” Randy said with pride.

“You’re just like her, sir. Thank you for saving us,” Zoe said sincerely.

Moments later, the surgeon emerged.

“We’ve stitched his wound. He’s stable now. You can visit him.”

“I guess it’s time for me to go,” Randy said, handing Zoe his business card. “If you need anything, call me.”

“Thank you so much, Sir Randy.”

Inside the hospital room, Zoe rushed to Liwayway’s side and hugged him. A spark ran through his body at her touch.

“Zoe… you still have my blood on your face,” Liwayway said weakly.

“I don’t want to wipe it off. It’s a symbol of your sacrifice.”

“Emo…” Liwayway teased with a faint grin.

“You’re lucky you’re injured, or I’d smack you,” Zoe muttered.

“My bad…” he chuckled.

They locked eyes, deeply, intimately, as though their souls had fused together—then quickly looked away, cheeks burning.

“I… I should call your guardian…” Zoe said, still flustered. What am I feeling right now? she wondered.

Several minutes later, Karmil rushed in.

“SON!” she cried, hugging Liwayway tightly. “What happened to you?!”

Liwayway explained everything.

“Liwayway, can I talk to you for a second?” Zoe asked.

They stepped into a quiet corner.

“I have a hunch someone we know is behind this,” Zoe said gravely.

“Who?” Liwayway asked.

“Antaro.” She gripped his hands.

Liwayway blushed. “I… I don’t care! As long as you’re safe!”

Zoe turned away, flustered as well. “Dummy…”

“We don’t have evidence. We can’t pin it on Antaro yet,” Liwayway said firmly.

“Where’s Andres’ brain when you need it?” Zoe laughed, easing the tension.

Meanwhile, when Karmil tried to settle the hospital bill, the registrar informed her it was already paid. They said a man had covered it. Karmil assumed it was the stranger who had helped the two kids.

Several minutes later, Zoe talked to Karmil.

"Hello, Ma'am. The police took our statements, but without any clear faces, there's not much they can do."

Karmil frowned, disappointed from the injustice her son experienced.

Chapter 8
From Bully to Jolly

Still in the eighth grade

As Antaro was about to be attacked by the masked perpetrator, a homeless man suddenly stepped in and drove the assailant away. Antaro, still stunned by what had just happened, froze in place.

“Can you spare some change or even a piece of food, sir? I’m starving…” the homeless man begged.

“I’m sorry, I don’t have anything on me…” Antaro muttered, before fleeing the scene in shock, leaving behind the man who had just saved his life.

Little did Antaro know, someone had witnessed the entire incident from the school window. It was Liwayway. Without saying a word, Liwayway wrote on a small piece of paper: “EVERY HUMAN LIFE MATTERS, EVEN THOSE SOCIETY DEEMS INVISIBLE.” He carefully slipped the note into Antaro’s locker.

The next day, Antaro opened his locker and found the folded piece of paper. What’s this? he thought. After reading it, he stood still for a few seconds, his head lowering in shame. Quietly, he slipped the paper into his pocket.

Liwayway, watching from a distance, saw it all.

When Antaro went home that evening, no one welcomed him. His step-siblings, as usual, treated him with cold indifference. To them, he wasn’t truly family—just the principal’s adopted son. Lonely and heavy-hearted, Antaro retreated to his room, lying on his bed with the paper clutched in his hand.

Every human life matters… he repeated silently, pondering the words until he drifted into a restless sleep.

The next day, Antaro wore a facemask and went out to search for the homeless man who had saved him. He asked around the neighborhood but couldn’t find him. Desperate, he questioned a local.

“Oh, you mean that homeless man? He got hospitalized last night. Someone beat him up badly.”

Antaro’s chest tightened. Why? Why him? Was it because of me? The one meant to suffer passed his burden onto him instead?

“Do you know his name, or which hospital he was brought to?” Antaro asked, his voice trembling.

“The folks here just call him Moymoy. I think they brought him to San Juan Hospital,” the man replied.

“Thank you,” Antaro said quietly, before heading straight to the hospital.

At the reception, he asked, “I’m looking for a man named Moymoy. Was he admitted here?”

The nurse glanced at him. “Oh, you mean the homeless man from last night? Is he your relative?”

Antaro hesitated, then swallowed hard. “No… but he’s my friend.” A friend I failed, he thought bitterly.

The nurse gave him the room number. Antaro walked slowly down the hall, stopping in front of the door. He took a deep breath and opened it. Inside, he saw Moymoy lying weak on the bed, his body covered in bruises. Guilt pierced through Antaro’s chest.

“Who are you?” Moymoy asked faintly.

Antaro pulled down his mask.

“It’s you… the boy from last night…” Moymoy murmured.

Tears welled in Antaro’s eyes. “I failed as a human.”

“No, you didn’t,” Moymoy whispered. “It wasn’t your fault I’m homeless.”

“You saved my life, yet I didn’t even thank you. Instead, you’re the one who ended up suffering…” Antaro’s voice trembled.

“I’ve made plenty of mistakes in my life too,” Moymoy said softly. “We’re all human. Mistakes are part of being alive.”

The two talked for hours, exchanging pieces of their stories. For the first time, Antaro felt understood. For the first time, Moymoy felt seen.

“I’ll get you something to eat,” Antaro finally said. “Wait here.”

Minutes later, he returned carrying a bucket of fried chicken in one hand and a gallon of milk in the other.

“For me?” Moymoy asked, his stomach growling.

“Yes,” Antaro smiled faintly. “I know you’re starving. It’s all yours.”

As Moymoy ate eagerly, Antaro's mind wandered back to his own childhood. He had grown up an orphan, never knowing his real parents, until the principal adopted him. But when his adoptive mother later had twins, Antaro slowly became the forgotten child—a shadow in the family home.

After Moymoy finished eating, Antaro looked at him seriously. "Would you… like a job? As a school bodyguard? You saved me once, and I want to give you the chance to put that bravery to use."

Moymoy's eyes widened. "I—I'd love to… but I don't have a place to stay. Or clothes to wear."

"Don't worry," Antaro reassured him. "The school has a dormitory for its employees. I'll take care of the clothes too."

Tears of gratitude streamed down Moymoy's face. "Thank you… thank you so much!"

For the first time in a long while, both of them felt a little less alone. And so, over fried chicken and milk, an unlikely friendship began to bloom.

Chapter 9
An Era Of Sweetness

The relationship's past

It was the weekend, and Zoe woke up thinking about Liwayway. I wonder what he's up to today? she pondered. After stretching, she went downstairs and was greeted by her mother, Sita, and her little brother, Tio.

"Good morning!" they both chimed.

Zoe yawned. "Good morning, Ma. Good morning, Tio." She smiled. "I'm going to church now to serve, but first, I'll eat your delicious cooking, Mama."

Sita giggled. "You must learn to cook too, so you can feed your knight in shining armor," she teased, clearly hinting at Liwayway.

"MAAAAAA! STAAHP!" Zoe blushed furiously.

"Okay, okay… I meant your king," Sita teased her further.

Zoe, red as a tomato, stammered. "MAAAA! THAT'S EVEN BETTER— I MEAN WORSE!"

"Alright, alright, let's stop the teasing and eat. I'm hungry," Sita said, laughing.

A few minutes later, the family finished eating.

"Ma, I'm off to church now. Tio, don't watch too much television, okay?"

No, not okay. Muehehehehehehe, Tio mischievously thought to himself.

"Take care, Zoe!" Sita called after her.

On her way to the village church, Zoe spotted Liwayway loitering outside a sari-sari store.

"LIWAYWAY!" she shouted excitedly.

Liwayway turned and saw his beautiful crush.

"Zoe…?" he uttered, surprised. "Where are you headed?"

"I'm going to serve at church. I'm part of the choir—I forgot to tell you. I'm a mezzo-soprano," Zoe said proudly.

Liwayway was amazed, even more infatuated. A woman of God… and a singer too? he thought.

“Oh, by the way, how’s your wound? Does it still hurt?” Zoe asked with concern.

“Well… it did, but not anymore—at least not after I saw you,” Liwayway said, trying to be smooth.

Zoe felt flustered but tried to mask it with humor. “Stop being corny!” she said, laughing.

“By the way, do you want to come with me to church? I can introduce you to my fellow choir members,” Zoe invited.

Liwayway’s heart skipped. I’m going to meet her friends? What will they think of me? His thoughts raced, but for Zoe, he wanted to try.

“Um… sure…” he replied nervously.

Zoe immediately grabbed his arm. “Let’s go!” she said enthusiastically.

Am I dreaming? If I am, please don’t wake me up, Liwayway thought.

Inside the church, Zoe’s choir friends were already waiting. One of them spotted him and shouted:

“LOOK! THE HERO!”

Some of them cheered. Zoe covered her face in embarrassment, while Liwayway stood confused.

“Hero?” he asked.

“They mean you, dummy,” Zoe muttered, cheeks pink.

Liwayway felt a strange mix of emotions—confusion, pride, and the thrill of being noticed. He smiled and waved shyly at Zoe’s friends.

As the mass began, Father Bigson stood before the congregation and began his homily.

“What makes a true sacrifice?”

Like what I did, right? Liwayway thought, his chest swelling with pride.

But then Father Bigson’s words struck like a blow:

“Our martyr once said, ‘I am a worm, not a man. Scorned by mankind, despised by many.’ He healed the blind, the sick, the lepers, and even cast out demons—yet he declared, ‘All for the glory of my Father.’

He was falsely accused and crucified, yet in His agony, He said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'"

Liwayway bowed his head, his ego deflating under the weight of those words.

Moments later, the choir began to sing:

"Lord, I offer my life to You, everything I've been through. Use it for Your glory…"

Each note pierced Liwayway's pride. He realized with shame that he had only thought of his own glory, not God's.

When it was time for the Eucharist, the people lined up to receive the hostia. Liwayway remained seated, eyes lowered.

Nothing I put in my mouth will cleanse me—not even the Body of Christ, he thought bitterly.

At the close of mass, Father Bigson offered his final blessings. Then one of the nuns declared loudly, "ALL FOR THE GLORY OF GOD!"

The entire congregation clapped in unison—everyone except Liwayway, who sat silently, lost in his thoughts.

Chapter 10
An Era Of Sweetness 2

As Zoe bid goodbye to her choir, she met up with Liwayway outside the church and noticed his serious face.

“Hey, are you alright?” asked Zoe.

Liwayway remained lost in his thoughts.

Zoe patted him on the shoulder. “HEY!” she said.

Liwayway snapped out of it. “Oh! Hey, Zoey! Sorry, I was just thinking about something.”

“What is it?” Zoe asked curiously.

Liwayway confessed, “About Father Bigson’s sermon—his definition of true sacrifice… I feel a bit too proud of what I did, in contrast to Christ’s image.”

Zoe chuckled. “DUMMY!” She smacked his back.
“We’re all human. We all feel pride—whether in the good we’ve done or the mistakes we’ve made. What matters is how you channel that pride. You are not God.”

Liwayway widened his eyes, stunned by what Zoe said.
“Really…?” he murmured.

“Well, that’s my point of view,” Zoe added. “Now stop with the drama.” She then took out the business card Randy had given her last time. “By the way, the man who helped you gave me this. It’s for a Ramen Shop. Want to eat there with me? My treat.”

A date?! With her?! Please don’t tell me this is a dream… Liwayway thought.
“Sure!” he said joyfully.

They climbed into a tricycle. Zoe felt dreamy as Liwayway sat beside her, their skin brushing against each other. Liwayway felt the same.

“So… you finally washed off the blood on your face?” Liwayway asked, trying to break the tension.

Zoe burst out laughing. “Yes, because my mother told me to. Even your blood is more precious than my skincare and lotions.”

“Ewwwww! That sounds creepy!” Liwayway mocked.

“Well, I am Count Dracula’s wife, you know,” Zoe teased.

“Then I’m Count Dracula!” Liwayway added.

The two fell silent, flustered and blushing.

Then Zoe placed her hand on Liwayway’s, and both stared into each other’s eyes, their souls longing for intimacy.

“I…” Liwayway began.
“Hmm…” Zoe whispered.

But the tricycle driver scolded them. “Hellooo?! We already arrived at the destination thirty seconds ago! Stop being lovey-dovey in my tricycle!”

What a meanie and a killjoy! Zoe thought as she got out of the tricycle and paid the driver.

“Here we are in front of the… hmm… Gomu Ramen Shop?” Zoe stifled a laugh at the name.

“WOAHHHHH!” Liwayway exclaimed.
“Is that the Straw Hat Jolly Roger on top of the Ramen Shop?!” His eyes burned with excitement.

“You’re right! I hadn’t noticed!” Zoe added.

“You watch One Piece too?!” Liwayway asked.
“Of course! It’s one of my favorite anime!” Zoe replied.

The two stormed inside the small restaurant, stunned by the simple yet elegant design full of One Piece references.

“Good day, Sir and Ma’am! Welcome to Gomu Ramen Shop!” the waiter greeted warmly. “Please take a seat at any table you like, and I’ll take your order.”

They chose a table for two and looked over the menu.

Zoe suddenly burst out laughing.
“Why are you laughing?” asked Liwayway.

“The menu has a Hidden Leaf Village symbol on it. That’s from Naruto, right?”

Liwayway chuckled too. “I think the owner of this restaurant is a huge anime fan.”
“Well duh… it’s obvious!” Zoe added.

They placed their orders, and within minutes, steaming bowls of ramen arrived.

“Why don’t you like your ramen spicy?” Liwayway asked.
“I actually don’t like spice. I have low pain tolerance—I hate pain. Whether physical or emotional.”

Liwayway was shocked by Zoe’s statement.
“Oh…” he muttered, then started slurping his ramen.

As he reached for his glass of water, it slipped from his hand and spilled onto the floor. Thankfully, it didn’t break, but the mess was enough to draw attention.

A janitor quickly arrived to clean it. As Liwayway glanced at him, something about the man felt strangely familiar.

Did I see this man before? he thought.

Chapter 11
An Era Of Sweetness 3

As the janitor finished cleaning the mess, Liwayway thanked him. Then began to eat his ramen again. One Piece started playing on the restaurant's television. Liwayway and Zoe noticed that it's Episode 1.

The two started watching it while slurping then ramen until Luffy in the television said, "If I have to die fighting for it… then I die." Liwayway continued to slurp his ramen along with Zoe.

"One Piece has a lot of symbolisms, you know?" Zoe said.
"Yeah, you noticed it too?" Liwayway said.

"Yes, the one that intrigued me the most is the concept of Haki" Zoe replied.
"It means willpower or ambition right? The author of One Piece said that Haki is present in all of us." Liwayway replied.

The two then finished eating their ramen then Zoe went to pay for the bill at the cashier.

Then all of a sudden, a commotion started to erupt at the scene.

"Sir, you haven't paid for your meal yet, I can't let you go outside yet."
"I'm so sorry, I forgot my wallet at home, can I pay you back later?" the man said.

The two of them started to have an argument until Randy arrived.

"What happened here?" asked Randy in a firm voice.

"Sir, this customer said he forgot his wallet so he can't afford to pay for his meal."

Randy then took a deep breath then said to the customer, "Do you promise to pay for your meal later?"

"Yes, I will." The customer said.

"Okay, you may go." Randy added.

As the customer was about to exit the restaurant, he put on a smug face.

Such idiots, they didn't know I actually had no purpose of paying for the meal. He said in his thoughts.

Liwayway noticed the smug face of the man Randy offered kindness to.
This world is unfair. Liwayway said in his heart.

Randy then looked around and saw Zoe.

"HEY! IT'S YOU!" Randy was surprised.

"Oh, Sir! Hello!" Zoe replied back enthusiastically

"What's your name again?" Randy asked.
"Zoe, sir. Zoe L. Ignis." Zoe replied.

"Did you know the word Zoe means vitality in Greek? Uniquely paired with your surname, Ignis means flame in Latin. Randy said.

"Really? How did you know all these information, sir?" Zoey was curious
"I have a degree in Philosophy, I studied it when I was still a student."

"Ohhh…" Zoe, fascinated.

"So where's your hero?" Randy asked.

"LIWAYWAY!" Zoe shouts to call Liwayway.

Liwayway then comes towards Zoe and Randy.
"Liwayway, this is Sir. Randy, the one who helped you." Said Zoe.

"The one who helped us." Said Liwayway.

"Thank you so much Sir, if it wasn't for you. I may have bleed to death on the road." Liwayway bowed to Randy.

"You're welcome, you're lucky you have a supportive wife."

"WIFE?!" Liwayway and Zoe said in unison.

“No, she’s not! I mean she will— I mean NO!” Liwayway muttered.
Randy bursts out laughing. Then the janitor entered the scene, “Bro, aren’t you going to eat yet? It’s lunchtime. Do you want to eat with me?”

Liwayway then finally remembered, It was the homeless man that his future teacher helped in the past when he was younger. The one who went inside the car.

Liwayway was stunned, his thoughts raced, Is this fate? He pondered.

“Yeah, I’m getting kind of hungry. Let’s eat. How about you guys? Care to join us?” Randy offered them.

“Yes, we will.” Liwayway said, as he wants to know more about the janitor.

“But we just ate?” said Zoey.

“I’m still hungry.” Said Liwayway.

“Well, come to my little office and let’s have lunch there.” Said Randy.

As they entered the office, all of them took a seat at the table.

Liwayway observed the janitor’s behavior. He seems very comfortable towards Sir. Randy. Then he asked the janitor, “Sir, may I ask your name?”

“Oh, my name is Solomon. You can call me Solo in short.”

“Okay sir Solo, may I ask what was your past?” said Liwayway bluntly.

“HEY!” Zoey smacked Liwayway on his shoulder. “You can’t go around suddenly asking people of their past!” she added.

“OUCH!” Liwayway groaned.

Solomon fell silent, “Why did you ask suddenly?”

“Because you look like the homeless man I saw through the window when I was younger.” Liwayway said in a straightfoward manner.

“Oh…” Solomon muttered.
“Yes that was me.” He added.

Everyone in the room was shocked, even Zoe and Randy.
“Do you know each other?” they both asked the same question.

Then Liwayway told his point of view when he was younger and everyone was surprised.

“Yes, it was my wife who took Solomon into our restaurant and gave him a job.” Randy said.

“I will forever be thankful to them, they showed me that even what society considers an ant can be noticed by those who know how to love.” Solomon said.

Liwayway felt mystical for a moment, Zoe felt wonder.

“What’s her name and where is she right now?”

“Her name is Rora, but I call her Nami, referencing it to One Piece. She is in Davao right now. Attending a recruitment expedition.”

“Ohhh… too bad we can’t meet her for now.” said Zoe.

The four of them continued to chatter until they finished.

“I think it’s time to go now Sir Randy. Thank you very much for your warm welcome and hospitality. Thank you too Sir Solomon for your inspiring story, I’ll never forget it.” Liwayway said then bowed.

Zoe thanked them too. Then both of them finally left the Ramen Shop.

“Those two have unique names, just like you. Vitality, Dawn, and a King.” Randy said to Solomon while chuckling.

Chapter 12
First Time

A few months have passed.

"REALLY?! DO YOU CONSIDER ME YOUR BOYFRIEND NOW?!" Liwayway jumped for joy, clutching Zoe's hands.

"You don't want to?" Zoe teased, giggling.

"OF COURSE I DO! YOU'RE MY VERY FIRST GIRLFRIEND!" Liwayway exclaimed, still in disbelief.

"Actually, same… you're my very first boyfriend," Zoe admitted softly.

"Really…? How come? With your beauty, you've never had one?" Liwayway asked, skeptical.

"Well, I rejected them… not my type… enough said," Zoe replied with a playful shrug.

The Ferris Wheel they were riding began its descent.

Zoe placed her hand over Liwayway's, and they locked eyes. A gentle tension filled the air, hinting that something was about to happen.

Liwayway leaned toward her, aiming for her lips, but Zoe quickly pressed her index finger against his mouth.

"Op op op!" she chuckled. "Marriage first!"

Liwayway sighed, "Fine…" and swiftly kissed her right cheek.

"Judas?!" she teased.

"What the—" Liwayway pouted.

After stepping off the Ferris Wheel, they sat by the bay, watching the waves ripple across the sea.

"Liwayway, would you ever betray me?" Zoe asked suddenly, her tone serious.

Liwayway's eyes widened at the question. "No, of course not!" he replied earnestly.

"You promise? You know I have zero tolerance for betrayal," Zoe said firmly.

"Yes, I promise," Liwayway answered, his voice steady and reassuring.

A seagull glided above the waves, diving gracefully to catch a fish.

“Poor fishy…” Zoe murmured.

“Well, that’s how nature works…” Liwayway replied.

An hour passed before they finally headed home, both basking in the warmth of a happiness they wished could last forever.

Chapter 13
Curiosity Kills The Cat

As they arrived home, their mothers greeted them warmly, and the group settled in to watch television together.

Breaking News: "Health authorities have confirmed the outbreak of a new, highly contagious virus, prompting widespread concern across the nation. All schools and public facilities will be temporarily suspended, and citizens are strongly urged to avoid going outside as officials work to contain the rapidly spreading pandemic."

"WHAT?!" Liwayway exclaimed, his eyes wide in shock.

Panic swept through the room. Everyone was in disbelief.

"What about our food and supplies?" Karmil asked anxiously.

Liwayway's friends shared his worry, each lost in thought.

And Zoe… Liwayway's mind wandered to her.

A month passed. Their only connection was through messages. Liwayway's boredom grew.

"Good morning, bae! Eat breakfast! I love you so much and miss you! Mwah!" Zoe's message popped up—she was always the first to greet him, knowing he was a heavy sleeper.

"Good morning, bae! Thank you! Eat breakfast too! I love you and miss you so much! Mwah!" he replied.

Still restless, Liwayway scrolled through his phone, mindlessly swiping.

"Do you want to meet friends alike? Come download our app now!" an advertisement flashed across the screen.

Curiosity piqued, Liwayway downloaded the app, set up his account, and started browsing.

He matched with a random user—a teenage girl around his age.

She was flirty, her words sweet as honey, trying to seduce him.

Liwayway gave in for a moment, flirting back. But almost instantly, he snapped out of it, exited the app, and deleted it.

Guilt rose in his chest. "What have I done…?" he whispered to himself.

Chapter 14
Zoe's Despair

Should I tell her? Liwayway thought. *It's just a minor mistake, right?* he added to himself. But even as he tried to bury it, guilt gnawed at him day after day.

Months passed, and the weight became unbearable. One night, Liwayway finally picked up his phone and sent a message to Zoe.

The tension in the air was thick, his hands trembling as he typed.

Liwayway: *Zoe…?*

A few seconds later, her reply came.

Zoe: *Yes, bae?*

He swallowed hard.

Liwayway: *I have something to tell you…*

Zoe: *What is it…?*

Liwayway's heart pounded.

Liwayway: *I… I cheated on you…*

The typing bubbles disappeared. Minutes of silence stretched like hours. Finally, her reply came.

Zoe: *How? How could you do this to me…? What happened?*

Liwayway's chest tightened.

Liwayway: *I met a random girl on a chatting app… things escalated quickly. She flirted with me, and I… I reciprocated. I'm so sorry, Zoe.*

Again, silence. Then the final blow:

Zoe: *We're done.*

The words pierced him. In a single moment, months of love and trust crumbled. Liwayway's entire body felt heavy, as if a boulder had been dropped on his chest. He buried his face in a pillow, his heart pounding with guilt and regret.

We're done… Zoe's words echoed in his mind like a curse. He remembered what she once told him: *"I don't have any tolerance for betrayal."*

On the other side, Zoe broke down in tears. Her mother, Sita, and her little brother, Tio, rushed to her side.

“I TRUSTED HIM! I NEVER ENTERTAINED ANYONE WHILE WE WERE IN A RELATIONSHIP!” she screamed, her voice raw.

Sita pulled her into her arms. “Block that snake on every social media platform. You deserve better, dear. It’s going to be alright—we’re here for you. That’s a part of relationships; you’ll meet more people.”

Tio hugged her big sister tightly. “Big sis, don’t cry anymore… we’re here.”

A day later, Liwayway lay weak in his bed when his mother, Karmil, entered the room.

“Liwayway, you haven’t eaten for a day. What’s gotten into you?” she asked, worry heavy in her voice.

“I ruined everything, Mama…” His voice cracked, trembling under the weight of his guilt.

Karmil sat beside him, stroking his hair gently. “Son, what you did was wrong. But remember what your father used to say before he passed: we are all human—flawed and capable of mistakes.”

But Liwayway couldn’t take in her words. His heart was drowning in regret, deaf to comfort.

Days turned into weeks. Liwayway tried searching Zoe’s social media accounts, but everything was gone—he was blocked everywhere.

Zoe, once cheerful and full of passion, began closing herself off. She built walls around her heart, wary and bitter, determined never to be hurt like that again.

Meanwhile, Liwayway drowned himself in mobile games, using them as an escape. What began as distraction slowly became addiction.

A year passed. The lockdown was lifted, and school returned to face-to-face classes. The academic year was over, and changes had been made.

Zoe switched sections, refusing to cross paths with him ever again. Andres transferred to the highest section to join his Student Government peers.

And Liwayway? He was left behind—alone, no friends, no Zoe. All because of one reckless moment of temptation.

Chapter 15
Mercy

Back to the present
Joy bonked Liwayway's head again. "YOU SILLY SNAKE!"

"OUCHHHH!" Liwayway groaned.

Zoe burst out laughing. "You guys are whack!" she said.

Joy then paused for a moment and looked at Zoe. "How come you're kind towards Liwayway now?" he asked.

Zoe fell silent, took a deep breath, and grew serious. "It was all thanks to our teacher in *Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao*," she said, then slowly smiled.

"Can you tell me more about it?" Joy asked, curiosity in his eyes. Liwayway, too, leaned closer, intrigued.

"So… her name is Ma'am Aurora. She's our teacher in that subject," Zoe explained.

The two boys froze in shock.
"Ma'am Rora?" Liwayway asked in disbelief.

"Yes. She's your teacher too?" Zoe asked.

"She's our adviser," Joy answered.

Zoe's eyes widened. "You guys are so lucky!"

"Why?" Liwayway asked.

"She's the reason I forgave you, dummy." Zoe chuckled softly.

The two boys were hooked.
"Tell us about it!" Joy urged.

A day ago — the first day of class

The introductions were finished, including Ma'am Rora's.

"Ma'am Aurora? Sir Randy's wife?" Zoe wondered silently.

"Okay, everyone," Ma'am Rora announced. "For your first individual activity, I want you to answer this question and present it in front of the class: ***Has anyone***

ever wronged you to the point it caused you despair? If so, would you still forgive them?"

Zoe's face hardened. Liwayway's image was the first to surface in her mind. Her gaze sank to the floor.

One by one, students presented their answers, until it was Zoe's turn.

"Ignis? Ignis, Zoe L.?" Ma'am Rora called.

Zoe remained frozen.

"Is Ignis not here?" Ma'am Rora raised her voice for the whole class to hear.

Zoe snapped out of her daze, forcing herself to rise. Her heart felt heavy, her body dragging itself forward. Her eyes stayed glued to the floor.

"Okay, Ignis. Present your activity," Ma'am Rora said.

But Zoe remained silent. The room thickened with tension.

Then it happened. Tears welled in her eyes, spilling moments later, streaming down the same cheeks Liwayway had once smeared his blood on.

Ma'am Rora walked toward her, compassion softening her features. "Meet me in my office later," she said gently, wiping Zoe's tears with her thumb.

"You can go back to your seat."

Zoe trudged back, her gaze still fixed downward.

"Are you okay? What happened?" a classmate asked, patting her back.

"I'm fine…" Zoe whispered. "Who are you?"

"My name's Brian—aka Brit, for short," he chuckled.

"Hello, Brit… was that embarrassing, what I did earlier?" she asked softly.

"Of course not. We're all human. We all cry," Brit replied.

An hour later, class ended.

"Ignis, come with me," Ma'am Rora instructed.

Zoe slowly rose and followed her into the office.

"Sit down," Ma'am Rora invited. "Can you tell me what happened in your life?"

Zoe hesitated, lips trembling.

“It’s okay. Everything you share will remain confidential,” Rora reassured her.

“It’s about my ex-boyfriend…” Zoe’s voice cracked.

“Tell me more,” Rora said gently.

Zoe unfolded her story, her pain spilling out. Ma’am Rora felt the ache in every word, the bitterness woven into her heart.

“Would you… forgive him for what he’s done?” Rora asked softly.

Zoe’s silence was sharp.

“No. He’s a snake, and always will be.”

Rora placed a hand on her shoulder.
“We are all humans, not snakes,” she said.

“Well, he’s an exception. A true human would never betray another,” Zoe snapped, anger sharpening her words.

“That’s an idealistic view of humanity, Zoe, but not reality,” Rora replied calmly.

Zoe grew still.

“Even snakes shed their own skin and become new,” Rora continued.

“But a snake is still a snake—it will bite you again,” Zoe rebutted.

“That’s not the point,” Rora said softly. “The point is change. Even we humans shed our own skin—our hearts, our souls. We can still be renewed.

No man steps in the same river twice. That’s what my husband always tells me—it’s from Heraclitus, a philosopher he studied in his youth.”

Zoe’s eyes widened. “Change?” she thought.

“You’re still young, Ignis. You’ll face many more trials in life, and betrayal might be among them,” Rora said.

Something inside Zoe shifted, a thorn plucked out of her heart.

“Ma’am Rora… ever since childhood, I’ve been betrayed so many times by friends. Even during hide and seek—someone would just go home and leave me.”

Rora laughed warmly. “Silly goose! Of course—they were children. Mischievous, yes, but innocent.”

Zoe’s chest lightened. She looked at Rora with fresh eyes.
“How about you, Ma’am Rora? Do you have a child?”

Rora's smile faltered. Silence settled.

"I… don't. I'm infertile," she said quietly.

"I'M SORRY!" Zoe bowed her head in shame.

"No, it's okay. It's not your fault," Rora said gently.

The two exchanged more words, Zoe finding inspiration, Rora seeing her younger self reflected in the girl.

"So… how do you feel now?" Rora asked.

"I feel… lighter. Thank you so much, Ma'am. You're the first teacher I've met who's like this."

"You're welcome. You can talk to me anytime," Rora said, patting her shoulder.

"I have to go now, Ma'am. May God bless you always," Zoe said, smiling for the first time that day.

Outside, Brit spotted her. "Oh, Zoe!"

"Brit!" she called back. The two went to the cafeteria together, Zoe sharing her story with him over a meal.

Back to the present

Joy made dramatic sounds. "AWWW, AWWW, OOOOH! That was so inspiring! I'm glad Ma'am Rora is our adviser."

"See? That's why I'm jealous of you guys," Zoe said.

Liwayway looked at her with pleading eyes. "Do you… forgive me now?"

"Yes," Zoe said firmly. "But let's stay as friends."

A weight lifted from Liwayway's heart. Still, sorrow lingered—he still loved Zoe.

"Thank you, Zoe… and I'm so sorry," he whispered, gently touching the cheek he had once stained with his blood.

Silence fell over the group. Even Zoe froze.

"It… it's okay. I just hope you learned your lesson," she replied softly.

Breaking the stillness, Joy asked, "So, what section are you in now?"

Zoe paused, then answered, "**10-Mercy.**"

Chapter 16
Opportunity

After classes ended, Liwayway bid goodbye to Joy and started walking home. On his way, he stumbled upon the very road where the incident with Zoe had happened. There, he noticed a homeless woman eating a piece of bread.

Liwayway felt something strange, as though an invisible force was pulling him toward her. He slowly walked closer and sat down beside her.

“Hello, Ms…?” Liwayway said, initiating the conversation.

The woman remained silent, still chewing. Then, unexpectedly, she broke her bread in half and offered a piece to him.

Liwayway froze in disbelief. *A homeless woman… offering me her food?*

“I chose to be homeless,” the woman suddenly uttered, breaking the silence.

Liwayway was taken aback, confused yet intrigued.

“You chose… to be homeless?” he asked.

“Did I stutter?” she replied sarcastically, chuckling.

“But why?” Liwayway pressed.

“Because I’m free from responsibilities and obligations,” she said.

“You mean… laziness?” Liwayway teased.

“Good one,” she laughed. “But no. I spent my whole life working my ass off, yet I was never the one who gained—it was always those in power.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I don’t want to get into too many details… but I was tricked into working at a POGO den that scammed people. When the authorities finally raided it, I lost my job. I was even detained. And when I was released, no one was waiting for me.”

Liwayway’s chest tightened. *Life is unfair,* he thought again.

“You don’t need to pity me,” the woman said firmly. “I already made my choice. I could still find work if I wanted to, but I choose this life.”

“I still don’t get it,” Liwayway admitted.

“It’s better to die a free person than to live in comfort as a slave,” she answered.

Liwayway fell silent, stunned.

“Radical freedom always comes at the price of comfort,” she continued.

“Can’t you be comfortable and free at the same time?” Liwayway asked.

“You can—but it’s risky. And that risk often comes with another price: mediocrity.”

“Mediocrity isn’t an external condition,” she added softly. “It’s internal.”

Liwayway admired the woman’s ascetic strength.
“What’s your name, Ma’am?” he asked.

“My name is Laya,” she replied.

The two shared stories for a while—Liwayway inspired, Laya reflective.

As dusk approached, Liwayway stood. “I should go now. It’s getting dark. Thank you for your story.” He left some cash beside her before walking away.

When he was far enough, Laya murmured to herself with a chuckle, “Dawn? Fine by me…”

When Liwayway arrived home, Karmil greeted him warmly.
“Son! You look cheerful today. What’s gotten into you?”

“I finally made amends with Zoe, Ma…” Liwayway said with a small smile. “She said we’re still friends… but…” His expression dimmed.

“But what?” Karmil asked gently.

“I still love her,” Liwayway confessed.

Karmil patted his head. “Did you tell her that?”

“No…”

“You should—when the moment is right,” she said kindly. “Anyway, let’s eat dinner! I cooked your father’s favorite—shrimp.”

“I miss him…” Liwayway whispered.

“Me too, son. Me too…” Karmil replied softly.

The two sat down at the dining table and began to eat.

“Ma, can I ask you something?” Liwayway said between bites.

“What is it?”

“What do you think of homeless people?”

Karmil paused, her face turning pensive. “They’re among the unfortunate ones. Each of them lost something vital in life, and that loss led them to where they are.”

“What if a person chooses to be homeless, even if they had the chance not to be?”

Karmil blinked, confused. “What? That’s not possible. Everyone wants to be financially stable and secure.”

“Oh… I see,” Liwayway said quietly.

“Why do you ask all of a sudden?” Karmil asked, puzzled.

“Nothing, Ma,” he replied, forcing a small smile.

After dinner and the dishes were done, Liwayway wished his mother good night and retreated to his room.

Lying in bed, he stared at the ceiling.
This world is absurd… he thought.

Then Zoe’s face came to mind. He grabbed his phone and curiously checked her social media. To his surprise, he was finally unblocked.

But… the world sure does give a lot of opportunities, he thought.

Chapter 17
Miracle

Randy jumped in joy and celebrated while shouting like a man who won the lottery.

“YOU’RE PREGNANT?! REALLY?!” He shouted.

“Yes!” Rora giggled.

“This is a miracle! We must go to the doctor immediately!” Randy said.
Then they both kissed each other deeply.

After they went to the hospital and then ran some diagnosis.

“While polycystic ovary syndrome known as PCOS can make it difficult for a woman to conceive, it doesn’t mean pregnancy is impossible. PCOS often causes irregular ovulation or, in some cases, no ovulation at all. However, many women with PCOS still release eggs intermittently. If intercourse happens to align with one of those ovulation windows, conception can occur naturally. Additionally, lifestyle changes—like weight management, improved diet, and reduced stress—can improve hormonal balance, making ovulation more likely. In some cases, the body simply resets in unexpected ways, and that can lead to a so-called ‘miracle pregnancy.”

This is what the gynecologist said.

The couple were very happy as if they were inside a dream.

“I promise to take care of you and our baby, darling.” Randy said while rubbing Rora’s belly.

“Even if I wake you up in the middle of the night because of my cravings?” she teased.

“Even if I have no tad bit of energy left in my body, I will.” Randy reassures.

The two then embraced each other.

“I kind of feel anxious, It’s my first time I will give birth to another human.” Rora said.

Chapter 18
The Burden Of Leadership

“Pres. Andres… the budgets for all the clubs are insufficient again. I thought we had stabilized them last time, but it’s still not enough,” Vice President Gabby said, frowning.

“There’s someone above us orchestrating this,” Andres replied, his voice calm but firm.

“You mean… the school administration itself?” Treasurer Kerl asked, leaning forward.

“The clubs are pointing fingers at us,” Sergeant-at-Arms Reign added, frustration evident in her tone.

“We don’t have concrete evidence yet,” Andres said, his gaze sharp. “But my instincts tell me something’s wrong. I need all of you to help me uncover it.”

“Do you really think the principal is involved?” Gabby whispered.

“Shhh! Someone might hear you!” Reign snapped, giving him a light but startling smack on the back.

“OUCH!” Gabby groaned, rubbing his back.

“Whoever it is, justice will be served,” Andres said, his voice low but unwavering. “Even if it means standing up to the President of the Philippines himself.”

Kerl frowned. “Be careful not to let courage blind you, Pres.”

“Justice doesn’t happen if no one dares to act,” Andres countered, his eyes scanning the room.

A brief silence followed, the weight of their mission settling over them.

“Alright,” Andres said, standing. “This meeting is over. Everything we discussed here stays confidential. Understood?”

“Yes, Pres.”

As the members filed out of the office, Andres noticed Antaro lingering near the doorway.

“Antaro?” Andres asked, surprised.

“Yes, Andres?” Antaro replied, masking any hint of curiosity.

“For how long have you been here?” Andres pressed.

“Just… now. I was about to grab something inside the room,” Antaro stammered.

“Alright. Take care,” Andres said, turning to leave, unaware that Antaro’s eyes had tracked every word.

“My stepfather…? Could he really be behind all this?” Antaro whispered to himself, a mix of shock and suspicion twisting his features.

Chapter 19
Torn Between Family And Truth

Antaro's phone rang while he lay on his bed. It was Andres.

"Hey," Andres said.

"Yeah?" Antaro replied, trying to sound casual.

"I know you heard what happened earlier," Andres said.

"What? I didn't," Antaro said, his chest tightening.

"I'm not dumb. Help us. I know you're a good person," Andres pressed.

Antaro froze, caught between fear and curiosity.

"My father isn't what you think he is," he said finally.

"I know something suspicious is going on at the school," Andres said, voice low.

"Whatever it is, my father isn't involved. And why do you trust me? You could just tell him, and I'd be in trouble," Antaro said.

"Because I know—deep down—you want to do the right thing," Andres replied.

Antaro hesitated.

"I'm not a good person. Goodbye," he said, ending the call.

Unease settled over him. Why would Andres suspect his stepfather? he wondered.

Then he saw him—his stepfather—leaving the room. The sight of the laptop left open on the desk pulled Antaro toward it, almost against his will.

A sharp spike of anxiety gripped him. Should I look?

Summoning what little courage he had, he stepped into the room and leaned over the laptop.

Rows of numbers filled the screen. One file name stood out:

2025_MakabagoNationalHighSchool_SchoolFunds_Budget.xlsx

Without fully thinking, Antaro sent the file to his own email and wiped the digital footprints.

Heart hammering, he froze as he heard heavy thuds on the staircase. He bolted back to his room, barely closing the door behind him.

Lying on his bed, his pulse still racing, he stared at the ceiling.

What have I done?

Yet, despite the fear, he had no plan to send it to anyone—at least, not yet.

Chapter 20
Can We Try Again?

Liwayway sent a friend request to Zoe on Facebook, his heart pounding with anticipation.

Within minutes, Zoe accepted. A jolt of adrenaline surged through him.

What do I say now? he wondered.

Hey, Zoe, he typed, hesitating over the words.

His phone buzzed almost instantly.

Hey, Liwayway, she replied.

How are you? he asked.

I am fine. What about you? she responded. Then, almost sharply, she added, *What do you need?*

Liwayway froze, the words he had rehearsed all week slipping through his mind. He wanted to confess his feelings, but uncertainty gripped him.

Several minutes passed before her phone buzzed again.

Hello? Liwayway? Are you still there?

Finally, he typed, his fingers trembling: *I still love you. I am sorry… can we try again? I promise I wont make the same mistakes.*

Silence. The weight of it filled the room.

Then, a message appeared:

I am sorry, Liwayway. I dont think I can. I forgave you, but I am not fully healed yet. I have learned to protect myself. I hope we can still be friends.

Sadness settled over him like a heavy fog.

He stared at the screen, then wrote, almost in a whisper: *I would trade my life to turn back time and fix my mistakes.*

We are still young, Liwayway, Zoe replied. *Maam Rora always says life will throw more challenges at us.* ***Your life… its worth more than a romance.***

Promise we will still be friends? he typed, a fragile hope clinging to his words.

Yes. I promise, she replied.

I love you. Always, he sent, heart laid bare.

Zoe reacted with a heart emoji.

He stared at it, tears finally slipping down his cheeks.

Thank you… for teaching me how to love, and how it feels to be loved, Zoe concludes.

Chapter 21
Blame And Rumors

*Shout out to the Student Government—**you guys have a thick face! Give us back our budget!*** The post, made by an anonymous member on the school forum, quickly gained hundreds of reactions from students.

The hurtful words and biting insults weighed heavily on Andres and his peers, taking a toll on their mental health.

“What are we supposed to do?” Gabby asked during the Student Government meeting, frustration evident in his voice.

“I actually talked to Antaro last night,” Andres said quietly.

“What happened? Why him?” Reign demanded.

“I asked if his stepfather might be involved,” Andres replied.

The group froze.

“WHAT?! Of all people, you talked to Antaro?!” Kerl exclaimed.

“I believe Antaro has changed. My gut tells me I can trust him,” Andres explained.

“I did some research on Principal Silim,” Andres continued. “Apparently, he was once convicted of fraud. I don’t even know how he became the principal.”

“He’s a shady man. I only found out about his past because I have a friend at the NBI,” Reign added.

“WHAT?! FRAUD?!” the group gasped in unison.

“Shush! Lower your voice,” Andres warned.

Meanwhile, Moymoy was patrolling the hallways, eavesdropping on the conversation in the background.

Fraud? Mr. Silim would never do that, Moymoy thought.
He’s one of the reasons I have a job today and am even alive. I better tell him about this.

Without hesitation, Moymoy rushed into Principal Silim’s office.

“Sir, I need to tell you something,” he said nervously.

Principal Silim offered a superficial smile.

“What is it, Moymoy?” he asked, his tone smooth.

“I… I heard Andres and his friends talking. Is it true that you were convicted of fraud in the past?”

Silim’s smile widened, unsettling in its charm.

“You actually believe them? They’re just high school students. High school students thrive on gossip and rumors,” he said casually.

Moymoy found himself drawn to the principal’s cunning, almost hypnotic presence.

“You’re right, sir. You wouldn’t do such a thing. Silly me…” he muttered, chuckling nervously.

“Very good—that’s my favorite janitor,” Silim said approvingly.

As Moymoy exited the office, Principal Silim leaned back, his expression unreadable.

I will play along with your little game, students of ***10-Justice,*** he thought to himself, a dangerous gleam in his eyes.

Chapter 22
It's A Boy!

Few months have passed

Randy waited outside the obstetrician's office, anxious and excited.

A few minutes later, Rora emerged, documents in hand.

"How was it…?" Randy asked, his nervous excitement palpable.

"It's a….." Rora paused for dramatic effect.

"BOY!" she finally exclaimed, joy lighting up her face.

"A BOYYYYY!" Randy echoed, elated. "Then it is decided, his name will be Dalisay!"

"That's a beautiful name! It means pure, right?" Rora asked.

"Yes, it does!" Randy confirmed.

"Can I ask you something, honey? Would you still continue teaching even though you're pregnant?"

"A true mother would never leave her kids hanging, right?" Rora replied confidently.

"Just don't push yourself too much, okay? You've got the spirit of Nami in you, my gorgeous Navigator."

"Pfft… you're corny," Rora teased.

"That's mean!" Randy shot back.

Chapter 23
Repentance

As Joy opened his door, he saw Troy eating at the table with a woman. As he got closer, he froze, rage surging through his chest.

“Pa?! Why is this woman here?!”

“Son, calm down. She is your mother…”

“I have no mother! She is dead in my eyes!”

The woman stepped toward Joy.

“Son…” she reached out to touch him.

“Don’t touch me, you dirty pig!” Joy shouted, fury and tears blending on his face.

“Your rich partner finally abandoned your gold-digging ass?” he spat.

“JOY! DON’T TALK TO YOUR MOTHER LIKE THAT! SHE IS STILL YOUR MOTHER!” Troy yelled.

“I have no mother!” Joy repeated.

His mother fell to her knees, grabbing Joy’s shirt and crying loudly.

“I AM SORRY!” she cried, her voice cracking.
“YOU MAY NEVER FORGIVE ME, BUT I WILL TRY MY BEST TO ATONE FOR MY SINS!” She buried her face in shame.

Then Joy’s little brother came downstairs.

“Big Bro?” he asked.

Joy’s tears fell freely as realization struck him: though his mother had caused the family to fracture, she still cared.

He ripped away from her grasp and stormed upstairs, locking his bedroom door, crying as if the world had ended, torn between anger and love.

Troy felt his chest tighten again. “Rita… please get me a glass of water…” he said to his wife.

Chapter 24
The Trio Reunites

It was Saturday morning when Liwayway woke up to hundreds of Messenger notifications.

What's this? he thought, rubbing his eyes.

Hello? a random member typed.

What's this group about? another asked.

Then a message appeared from Andres.

I gathered you all here today for one thing—the school's rampant corruption in our funds Andres declared. *I only added friends I know I can trust*

Corruption? Liwayway repeated in his mind, confused.

He scrolled through the list of group members—and froze when he saw a familiar name.

Zoe? She's here too?

Zoe began typing.
Liwayway? Andres? What is this?

I want everyone here to help me uncover who's behind the corruption in our school Andres replied. *I believe Principal Silim is the mastermind. I need us to find evidence*

Andres… we're talking about going against the Principal himself—the very foundation of the school Zoe responded.

The true foundation of our school is built on values, not titles or authority Andres answered. ***And justice is the highest virtue of all***

Andres, don't let your courage blind you… Gabby interjected. *We have to play this wisely.*

Liwayway leaned back, unsettled. *This isn't the Andres I once knew. He used to be calculated, strategic. Now he speaks like someone consumed by a hunger for justice. I guess being falsely accused has taken a toll on him.*

Then Andres addressed him directly.
Liwayway, since you're in the lowest section, I want you to spy on Principal Silim's movements. He rarely pays attention to the lower sections

And Zoe he continued, *keep an eye on Antaro. I suspect he knows more than he lets on*

Liwayway's thoughts lingered. *Andres's desire for absolute justice has blinded him so much… he didn't even stop to greet his old friends.*

Chapter 25
I Hate That I Love You, Mother.

It was Sunday morning when Liwayway went downstairs and was greeted by Karmil.

“Good morning, Son!” she said warmly. “Come, let’s eat breakfast! I cooked some Arroz Caldo, so eat it while it’s still hot!”

The two ate together, sharing the quiet comfort of the meal. Then something suddenly came into Liwayway’s mind.

“Ma? Can I go to church today?” he asked.

Karmil looked at him with surprise. Liwayway was the type who never went to church, not even when the family attended together.

“Why all of a sudden?” she asked, intrigued.

“I want to… listen to Father Bigson’s homily,” Liwayway replied.

“Oh, well… just be careful, okay?” Karmil said with a gentle smile.

After finishing their meal, Liwayway bid his mother goodbye and set off.

When he arrived outside the church, he noticed a homeless man begging at the corner. Yet the people entering the church simply ignored him. Liwayway stopped and watched in silence—until he froze, stunned to see Joy, his best friend, handing the man a 100 peso bill.

“Joy?!” Liwayway exclaimed.

Joy looked up, equally surprised.

“Bro?!” he answered.

“You’re going to the Mass too?” Liwayway asked.

“Yes, I am. What about you?” Joy replied.

“Yes, I’ll join you. Let’s sit beside each other,” Liwayway said.

Together, they went inside. Liwayway’s eyes wandered to the choir loft, where he saw Zoe and her friends singing with joy. For the first time in his life, he felt a genuine smile form on his face.

At least she’s finally happy… he thought.

Then Father Bigson began his sermon.

"***What does it mean to truly forgive?***" he asked.

Joy's heart sank. Instantly, he thought of his mother—the woman who had once broken their family apart.

"Once there was a prostitute," Father Bigson continued. "The Pharisees caught her and brought her before **Christ**, hoping to test Him."

Joy listened intently, his chest growing heavy.

"'Teacher,' they said mockingly, 'this woman was caught in the very act of adultery. The Scripture commands us to stone her. What do you say?'

They pressed Christ again and again for an answer until He stood and declared: **'Let the one among you who is without sin cast the first stone.'**

The Pharisees froze in silence. One by one, they set down their stones and walked away, leaving only the woman and **Christ**.

'Where are they? Has no one condemned you?' **Christ** asked.

'No one, Lord,' the woman replied.

'Then go, and sin no more,' **Christ** said."

Tears welled up in Joy's eyes until they spilled freely down his cheeks.

"How can I judge my mother," he whispered, voice trembling, "when I myself walk as an imperfect man?"

Liwayway noticed his friend crying. Concerned, he pulled out his handkerchief, gently wiping Joy's tears while patting his back.

"What happened, Joy?" he asked softly.

"My mother… she's back in our lives," Joy admitted. "My mind says I hate her, but my heart says she's still the mother who bore me…"

Liwayway felt the weight of his friend's struggle, the raw conflict within him.

The Eucharist began, and Liwayway helped Joy fall in line beside him.

When Joy stepped forward to receive the hostia, Father Bigson noticed his swollen, tear-streaked eyes. With fatherly instinct, he said, "Forgive them, for **Christ** has forgiven us." The words struck deep, and Joy broke down once more.

When it was Liwayway's turn, memories and faces flooded his mind—Zoe's forgiveness, Karmil's unyielding support, Andres' bravery, Joy's hidden suffering, and the love of those who stood by him.

"The Body of Christ?" Father Bigson asked, holding the hostia.

Liwayway smiled and replied, "**Amen**."

As they returned to their seats, Joy leaned toward him, whispering through a fragile smile, "Our family is finally complete."

All Liwayway could do was smile back, a wide, heartfelt smile that needed no words.

Chapter 26
You Can't Save Everyone

Andres jolted awake in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat. His chest heaved as fragments of the same nightmare clawed back into his mind—the nightmare that had never left him.

Nine years ago

"Andres! Andres!" a girl's voice rang out. "Come play hide and seek with us!"

"Alright, just let me finish my lunch first," Andres replied through a mouthful of rice.

Minutes later, he ran outside, only to be greeted by the playful smirk of his childhood friend.

"Since you made us wait, you're the it!" she teased.

Andres groaned. "Fine, fine…" He covered his eyes with his hands and began to count. "One… two… three…"

When he reached twenty, he shouted, "Ready or not, here I come!"

He found his friends one by one, laughter echoing through the neighborhood, until only one was left. His closest friend—Sam.

"Where could she be…" he muttered, scanning every corner.

At last, he spotted her crouching behind a parked car. Their eyes met. Sam squealed and bolted.

"Hey! That's cheating!" Andres shouted, chasing after her.

"No, it's not! Catch me if you can!" she taunted, sticking out her tongue as she darted into the street.

"Sam, wait!" Andres yelled, his voice cracking.

That's when he saw it—an oncoming car, its headlights blazing, speeding straight toward her.

"Sam! Look out!"

Instinct took over. Andres sprinted into the road, his legs pumping faster than his thoughts. Then—impact.

The world turned white.

When he opened his eyes again, the world was different.

“It’s all your fault!” Sam’s parents screamed, their grief pouring into every word.

“No—our son had nothing to do with this!” Andres’ parents shouted back, their voices trembling with anger and despair.

The shouting blurred into noise. The only thing Andres knew, the words that etched themselves into his soul, was a whisper in his mind:

You can’t save everyone.

Chapter 27
Silim's Victim

"Your objective is to eliminate this guy," Tilag said, sliding a folder across the table.

The hitman leaned back, flipping it open. A photograph stared up at him. "Who is this person?" he asked, his tone calm but his eyes sharp.

Tilag's jaw tightened. "That bastard scammed me out of everything I worked for. Years of sweat and blood—gone because of him. He tricked me, humiliated me, and walked away smiling. I can't let it stand."

The hitman studied the photo again. "And you're certain this is the one?"

"Absolutely. I would never forget that face."

"Fine," the hitman said, closing the folder. "How do you want the assassination carried out?"

Tilag's lips curled into a bitter smile. "During graduation. When he's the ceremony starts."

The hitman raised an eyebrow. "Bold. Public. Risky. So it seems, he became a principal for a certain High School."

"That's the point," Tilag shot back. "I want everyone to see him fall. I want his success torn from him in the very moment he thinks he's won."

The hitman tapped his fingers against the table, thinking. "You're asking for precision, not just a bullet. Do you want it to look like an accident? A message? Or a clean execution?"

Tilag leaned forward, his eyes burning. "A message. I want his last breath to remind everyone that betrayal has a price."

The hitman smirked faintly. "You're driven by vengeance, not business. That makes clients sloppy."

Tilag's fist slammed the table. "Just name your price. I don't care what it costs."

The hitman held his gaze for a long moment, then finally nodded. “I see. Understood. Consider it done.”

Tilag exhaled slowly, the tension in his chest loosening just enough to let a cruel satisfaction slip in. The deal was sealed.

Chapter 28
No Hope Left

<u>1 month left before graduation</u>

I can't seem to get any intel from the Principal, Andres. Liwayway said.

Then, do better! Andres replied.

Liwayway felt Andres' frustration at the moment.

I can't seem to find any intel from Antaro either, he won't budge. Zoe said.

You guys are all useless! How would justice be served when cowardice reigns above! Andres said in frustration.

I think we should just let it go… we're about to graduate now since there's only 1 month left in the academic calendar. Gabby said.

A minute of silence has passed.

Gabby was removed from the group.

Liwayway and Zoe started to grow concerned and worry about their friend.

Andres, you need to calm down. You can't save everyone. Zoe said.

A moment of silence and tension arised in the group again.

What did you say, Zoe? Can you repeat what you just said to me? Andres replied.

I said, you need to calm down. You can't save everyone. Zoe replied.

Zoe was removed from the group.

Liwayway felt pity for Andres, what once a man who fought for justice became the very thing he swore to destroy.

Schoolmate 1 left the group.
Schoolmate 2 left the group.

Until all that is left, is Liwayway and Andres.

What? You're going to abandon me too? Andres said.

No, I believe in you, Andres. Liwayway replied.

Chapter 29
Drown The Sun

It was finally graduation day, yet Ma'am Rora wasn't there to lead her section—she was in the hospital, ready to give birth to her first child.

"LIWAYWAY! ZOE! BRIT!" Joy waved as he ran up to his friends.

"Let's take pictures!" Brit grinned, holding up his phone with excitement.

They posed together—Joy, Zoe, and Brit flashing peace signs, while Liwayway lifted his hand in a playful finger heart.

Soon, their parents arrived.

"Nice to meet you! Are you Zoe's mother?" Karmil asked warmly.

"Yes, I am. Nice to meet you too!" Sita replied with a smile.

Rita and Troy also appeared, Joy's parents. Joy quickly wrapped his arms around them both, his grin wide.

Watching them, Liwayway felt a bittersweet tug at his heart. He thought of his father—the man absent from this milestone in his life.

The ceremony began. Students and parents were separated, each taking their places on opposite sides of the venue.

High above, unseen by most, the hitman lay prone on the rooftop, assembling his sniper rifle. His crosshairs found their way toward the stage.

Then, the valedictorian, Andres, stepped up to the podium.

"Fellow graduates, teachers, parents, and everyone gathered here today…" His voice carried across the hall. "I know I'm expected to give a speech full of thanks and inspiration. And yes, I am thankful—to my classmates, to the teachers who truly cared, and to the friends who stood beside me. But standing here, I can't pretend everything is fine…"

His words cut through the crowd. Some listened in silence, others whispered in confusion. The principal, Silim, sat stiffly, hiding his clenched fists with polite applause while laughing bitterly inside. *I won this game, 10-Justice,* he thought.

The ceremony moved on. One by one, students were called to the stage to receive their diplomas.

The hitman steadied his aim. The crosshairs narrowed, this time on Principal Silim.

“Section 10-Love!” the announcer declared.

Liwayway felt a sudden chill, an uneasy weight pressing on his chest. His instincts screamed that someone was watching.

“Ignacio, Liwayway T.!” the announcer called.

He stepped forward, his heartbeat quickening. As he reached for his diploma, he glanced at his mother. Karmil’s eyes glistened with tears of pride. Then—out of the corner of his eye—he spotted a glint of metal on the rooftop.

“SNIPER!” Liwayway roared.

Before anyone could react, he lunged forward, shoving Principal Silim out of the line of fire. A single shot cracked through the air. The bullet tore into Liwayway’s upper left chest, and he collapsed.

For a heartbeat, silence froze everyone. Then chaos erupted. Parents screamed. Teachers shouted for order. Students scattered in terror.

“LIWAYWAY!” Joy’s voice broke as he sprinted toward his friend.

“Son!” Karmil fell to her knees, clutching his hand, sobbing uncontrollably.

Zoe shoved her way through the panicking crowd, tears already streaming down her face. “Stay with us, please! Don’t you dare leave us now!”

Brit dropped beside him, pressing his hands desperately over the wound, his palms slick with blood. “He’s losing too much—someone help!”

Andres, shaking, threw off his graduation sash and knelt. “Don’t close your eyes, Liwayway. You’re stronger than this. You always were!”

Sirens wailed in the distance.

Liwayway’s breathing grew shallow, his vision dimming as his friends’ voices blurred together—pleading, crying, calling his name again and again.

Minutes later, paramedics arrived, lifting him onto a stretcher. His mother clung to his hand until the very last moment as they wheeled him into the ambulance.

The cheers of graduation had been silenced. All that remained were echoes of panic, and the desperate hope that Liwayway would survive.

Chapter 30
Liwayway

The ambulance roared through the night, siren wailing, red lights bouncing off the windows. Inside, everyone sat frozen in shock. Liwayway's blood stained their trembling hands, the metallic scent thick in the air.

Zoe pressed a towel against his wound, whispering frantically, "Stay with us, please… just stay with us."

Joy slammed his fist against the seat. "Damn it! Why him?!"

Brit sat stiffly in the corner, knuckles white from gripping the rail. He wasn't crying, but his jaw was locked, his silence louder than words. "Don't you dare quit on us," he muttered under his breath.

When the ambulance screeched to a halt, medics rushed Liwayway into the hospital. The group tried to follow, but a nurse stopped them.

"You'll have to wait outside. We'll do everything we can."

Hours passed. The sterile white corridor seemed endless. Finally, two surgeons emerged, masks pulled down, their faces heavy with fatigue.

"There were no vital organs damaged," one of them said, "but he lost a dangerous amount of blood. We need a transfusion immediately."

The group exhaled in shaky relief.

"Me, doctor," Karmil said quickly. "My blood's Type O."

Zoe stepped forward. "I'm Type O too. Please… let me do this. Let me give him my blood."

Karmil froze, torn between gratitude and fear. Finally, she nodded. "All right. Just… make sure he lives."

The doctors nodded and led Zoe away. Hours later, Liwayway was stable and moved into a recovery room, unconscious but alive. The group gathered quietly around his bed, the tension finally easing.

Meanwhile, Antaro sat apart, staring at his phone. The image of his stepfather collapsing under sniper fire still replayed in his mind. With a shaking hand, he pulled up the file he had saved months ago—the one he had been too afraid to look at until now.

His thumb hovered, then he sent it to Andres.

A few minutes later, Andres's reply came: *I thought you didn't know anything about this, Antaro?*

Antaro typed slowly, *I didn't. I just saved it by accident. I didn't even know how to read it. But after what happened tonight… I think you should see it.*

Andres scrolled through the document, his expression darkening. *This is bad. The records show millions transferred straight to Silim's personal account.*

Antaro swallowed hard. His chest felt heavy. *You're telling me… my stepfather was behind all this?*

Andres replied. *The evidence is clear. I'll take it from here.*

That night, Andres posted the documents publicly, attaching a statement about Principal Silim's corruption, and forwarded everything to his contact in the NBI.

By the next morning, news spread like wildfire. Social media flooded with outrage. Soon after, police cars pulled up outside Silim's house.

The family was in chaos.

"We have a warrant for the arrest of Mr. Silim Antaro," the officer declared. "Charges: **malversation of public funds.** You have the right to remain silent—"

"Wait! No, this is a mistake!" Silim's wife shouted, clutching his arm. "You can't just take him away!"

His children cried, "Papa, tell them it's not true! Please!" Antaro stood frozen near

the gate. His stepfather, wrists cuffed, looked straight at him. For the first time, his stern eyes weren't commanding —they were pleading.

"You, Antaro…" Silim's voice cracked. "You gave this to them, didn't you?"

Antaro's throat tightened. He wanted to say no, to run, to undo everything. But instead, his voice came out low and shaking. "I… I couldn't lie anymore. You were supposed to protect us. Instead, you betrayed everyone."

Silim's wife turned on him, her voice sharp with betrayal. "How could you? He raised you like his own! After everything—"

"He raised me to keep quiet," Antaro said, finally meeting her eyes. "But I won't keep quiet about this. Not anymore."

Silim's shoulders slumped as the officers guided him into the patrol car. His wife sobbed into her hands, their children clinging to her. Antaro stood rooted to the ground, guilt and grief tearing at him, but beneath it all—a fragile sense of resolve.

Later in the hospital, an hour before sunrise.

"Push!" the doctor urged Ma'am Rora, who cried out in pain. "Your wife is undergoing prolonged labor," one nurse told Randy, who could only clutch her hand.

Down the hall, Liwayway finally stirred. His eyelids fluttered, and the group rushed to his bedside.

"Liwayway!" they cried in relief.

He glanced weakly at Andres. "Andres…"

"Yes? I'm here. Don't strain yourself," Andres said quickly.

"You can't save everyone," Liwayway whispered, voice thin. "But… you can still do what you can."

Andres froze, chest aching. Tears welled in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Andres whispered hoarsely. "I let revenge blind me. I thought exposing the truth was everything, but I forgot what mattered."

Liwayway gave a faint smile. "Don't lose yourself again."

Antaro, who lingered at the doorway stepped inside, guilt etched across his face.

Liwayway turned his head slightly. “Antaro…”

Antaro swallowed hard. “I… I gave Andres the files. The proof about Silim. They’ve taken him in. My stepfather… he’ll never forgive me. His wife, his children… they’ll hate me for this.” His voice cracked. “And maybe I’ll hate myself too.”

Liwayway studied him for a long moment, his breath weak but steady. “You chose truth… even when it tore your family apart.”

Antaro lowered his head. “Then why does it feel like I betrayed them?”

“Because you loved them,” Liwayway said softly. “Love always hurts when it meets the truth. But silence would have destroyed even more.”

Antaro’s lips trembled. “You don’t hate me for this?”

A faint smile touched Liwayway’s face. “I don’t have the strength to hate anyone anymore.”

For the first time, Antaro let out a broken laugh. He stepped closer, resting his hand on the bedrail. “Then I’ll carry the weight. Even if they all turn their backs on me, I’ll carry it. Just… don’t leave us, Liwayway. Not you too.”

Liwayway’s hand twitched, and Antaro gripped it gently. They stayed that way for a moment before letting go.

Moments later, Zoe walked straight to Liwayway’s bedside, tears streaming, and lifted his weak hand. Gently, she pressed it against her cheek — the same cheek where his blood had once smeared.

“Do you remember?” she whispered. “That night… your blood marked me here. I swore I’d carry it with me. So don’t you dare leave me now. Not after everything.”

The room went silent. Joy turned away, covering his face. Brit rubbed his eyes roughly and muttered, “Idiot… making us think we’d lost you.”

Karmil clasped her hands together, whispering thanks under her breath. Andres bowed his head, his tears falling freely.

The door swung open again, this time not a doctor but two men in uniform. Their presence sent a hush through the room.

“Are you the companions of the victim?” the officer asked, voice steady, eyes scanning the group.

“Yes, sir,” Brit answered, standing straighter. “We were there when it happened.”

The officer nodded, flipping open a small notebook. “We’ll need your statements. Witness accounts are crucial if we’re going to track down the shooter.”

“The hitman… you didn’t catch him?” Andres asked, his voice carrying both frustration and fear.

“Not yet,” the officer admitted, his tone heavy but professional. “We found the sniper’s nest on the rooftop, but he was already gone when we arrived. We recovered shell casings, a cigarette butt, and partial footprints. Forensics is on it.”

Antaro clenched his fists. “So he could still be out there? Hunting?”

“We can’t rule it out,” the officer said frankly. “But we’ll assign patrols near the hospital. And the NBI has already received the financial records you sent. If the shooter was hired, following the money will help us find him.”

Karmil’s voice broke. “Please… just keep my son safe.”

The officer gave her a brief, reassuring nod. “We’ll do everything we can, ma’am. But I’ll be honest: whoever arranged this has resources. It won’t be simple.”

After the police took their statements and left, silence settled back over the room — the fragile kind, stretched between fear and hope.

It was then that Liwayway stirred, pulling everyone’s attention back to what mattered most.

At that same moment, Rora’s newborn let out its first sharp cry. Fragile, but alive. Liwayway closed his eyes, a faint smile tugging at his lips. Outside, **the sun finally broke across the sky.**

—THE END—